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ABSTRACT

This monograph notes that while all aspects of the middle level education program contribute to students' personal development, the core of the effort lies in the counseling and guidance program. It cites literature suggesting that the program should consist of counseling, guidance curriculum, and advisement. Definitions for each of these three parts of the program are given. It is assumed that counseling is a well-understood structure in most schools; consequently, the report focuses on the guidance curriculum and on advisement, two areas in which the teacher can play a role. Possible teacher roles in the counseling and guidance program are described and ways of developing guidance curriculum and advisement programs are considered. The content and delivery of a middle level guidance curriculum are discussed. A section on a teacher advisor program explains the teacher's role, the counselor's role, the selection of teacher advisors, appropriate activities for a teacher advisor program, the scheduling of advisory periods, the program design and implementation, potential problems in such a program, and benefits of a teacher advisor program. (NB)

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California League

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SUPPORTING MIDDLE LEVEL STUDENTS
THROUGH COUNSELING AND
TEACHER ADVISOR PROGRAMS

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by

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The California League of Middle Schools is an association of people who are interested in furthering the growth and development of middle schools and middle school concepts. The League is composed of parents, teachers, school and district administrators, State Department of Education officials, and others who have an interest in the education of early adolescents.

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Counseling, Guidance, and Advisement in the Middle Grades

In its philosophical foundations, middle level education gives as much importance to the healthy personal development of each student as to his or her academic achievement. Early adolescence is a crucial stage in human development. Knowledge about oneself and the support of concerned adults are critical during these years, when youngsters are undergoing so many changes and laying so much of the groundwork for their adult lives.

All aspects of the middle level program contribute to students' personal development, but the core of this effort lies in the counseling and guidance program. The literature on middle level counseling and guidance suggests that the program should consist of three interlocking parts: counseling, guidance curriculum, and advisement.

Authoritative definitions of these three terms vary and sometimes overlap. In this monograph, the following definitions will be used:

- o Counseling: Direct services provided to students, staff, and parents by trained counseling professionals.
- o Guidance Curriculum: Sequenced instruction in personal growth issues, such as human growth and development, values, personal responsibility and decision making, successful relationships, study skills, and career exploration.
- o Advisement: Development of a supportive ongoing relationship between a student and a caring school adult--a relationship that provides the middle level student with needed security, advice, affirmation, and a positive adult role model. When such staff/student relationships are systematically created, to include all students and to deliver the guidance curriculum, the effort is frequently called a Teacher Advisor program.

On the assumption that "counseling" is a well-understood structure in most schools, this monograph will focus on the guidance curriculum and on advisement--programs which are strongly advocated by many authors, as being central to the purpose and philosophy of middle level education.

It is in these two aspects of a school's counseling and guidance program that teachers can take a role. The school's professional counselor, of course, delivers the "counseling" arm of the program; but, given current ratios--one counselor to several hundred students--and the counselor's long list of existing duties, it is hard to imagine that a counselor can single-handedly teach the full guidance curriculum and serve as the day-to-day mentor of every student in the school.

Teachers are the school adults who have the most sustained daily contact with individual students. They have the first opportunity to observe a student's academic and personal growth needs. They are most often named by a student as the "significant school adult" in that student's life. Under the direction of the school's counselor, teachers can develop their natural closeness to students into an advisory/guidance program that systematically addresses young adolescents' need to learn about themselves and to be accepted and affirmed by a significant adult.

It must be clear, however, that a Teacher Advisor is not a counselor and in no way displaces the traditional counseling staff. To confuse professional roles is probably the surest way to disrupt a nascent advisory program, as Alexander and George observe:

Teachers are not expected to be counselors or psychiatrists. Some districts, simply because of inexperience, have made the mistake of expecting teachers and middle school students to spend each day in intense encounter-like sensitivity sessions . . . Teachers are not trained to conduct this type of activity, students are not ready for it and parents will not support it.

Teachers are required, in their advisory role, only to be themselves. They are invited to display the same kind of

characteristics that are found in good friendships, good teaching and helping relationships in general. They must be able to accept the student and what he is experiencing and communicate that understanding clearly . . .

As this characterization indicates, the Teacher Advisor role is not intended as a radical departure for teachers. Although training and support in the role are crucial, Bergmann and Baxter point out that, "Most teachers at the middle level do more guiding and advising than they realize as they respond to the roller coaster personality of the early adolescent."² They describe the Teacher Advisor as a student's "best adult school friend,"³ an adult who is available to listen, support, advise on regular matters, and make the proper referrals on serious problems.

In an advisory program, teachers handle basic guidance matters, including such tasks as student record keeping and course registration. This frees the counselor to "deliver a higher level of professional service."⁴ According to one guidebook on advisement programs:

Counselors are needed and utilized more than ever in an Advisement program....In an Advisement program, counselors become an essential resource to other staff members and students....They become consultants in guidance for administrators, teachers, and parents, and serve as a resource in affective education and life skills development. Finally, in an Advisement program, counselors can focus on working individually with students who have personal and social problems.⁵

Developing Guidance Curricula and Advisement Programs

Academic course content often derives from the school district and state, but the counseling and guidance program should derive from the school site: it should be based on a careful faculty assessment of local needs, the school's philosophy of affective education, and staff interests and capabilities. The literature does not offer one ready-made model; instead, it stresses that each school should plan a unique program, since "there are no particular content, structure, or tasks common to all advisory systems."⁶ But the literature does

offer suggestions and advice that may help school site personnel design their own program.

Content and Delivery of a Middle Level Guidance Curriculum

On the surface, young adolescents differ greatly from one another, but a study of students' emotional concerns at one Oregon middle school found more consistency than difference between boys and girls and across the three grade levels. All students focused on such familiar questions as: What if I can't get my homework done? What if I get bad grades or flunk? What am I going to be when I grow up? Why don't my parents understand me? Do I look all right? What will the future hold?⁷

The concerns expressed in Oregon mirror guidance curriculum content suggested by the California middle level education report, Caught in the Middle: academic guidance to help students succeed in school now and in the future, along with developmental personal guidance relating to self-knowledge, self-esteem, responsibility and decision making, values, and interpersonal relationships.⁸

In both academic and personal guidance curricula, there are two aspects of instruction to plan: (1) delivering "objective" information and skills and (2) fostering affective development.

According to Caught in the Middle, the "objective" aspects of academic guidance include orientation to school, instruction in learning skills, career exploration, and provision to students (and their parents) of timely information on courses and curriculum--information that will help them to make informed choices about present coursework and options for high school. The "affective" aspects include affirmation and motivation that will encourage each student to strive academically.⁹

Affective education also has "objective" content; health knowledge and the skills of personal decision making, for example, can be taught essentially as classroom subjects. Together with affective development activities, such as discussions, values clarification, or group counseling, "objective knowledge" about personal concerns may help many students understand themselves and cope more effectively with the changes of adolescence. This may prevent the normal fears and problems of this age from escalating into crisis situations.

Commercial or ready-made guidance curriculum packages are available; a full curriculum may be developed locally; or a mix of in-house and commercial materials may be used.

The content of the guidance curriculum may be delivered in a number of ways. Counselors may run small groups or co-teach in classrooms.¹⁰ Guidance content may be integrated into academic subjects; for example, social studies or health teachers might teach units on decision making, while all teachers discuss careers related to their academic subjects.¹¹ Or, responsibility for much of this content may be assumed by the "homeroom" or "advisory" teacher.

Assigning each student to a homeroom or "core" teacher is a traditional method for linking each student to a significant school adult. In grade 6, when students are making the transition away from the self-contained classroom they knew in elementary school, they may spend a good part of their day studying several subjects with a "core" teacher or an interdisciplinary teaching team. In the higher grades, students often start the day in homeroom, which may simply be 10 minutes for announcements and attendance-taking. But, extended by 20 to 30 minutes, the core class or homeroom can provide time for instruction in developmental guidance areas. Homeroom or core teachers thus develop their existing role into that of a Teacher Advisor.

Teacher Advisor Programs

The Teacher's Role

Alexander and George suggest these as some of the responsibilities of a Teacher Advisor:

- o Academic Expert: Assisting and monitoring each student's curriculum choices, orienting and updating students and parents, maintaining the student's cumulative record, preparing report cards, assisting students with study skills, arranging interventions for special learning needs, working with other teachers involved with the student, managing parent conferences;
- o Assistant to Students' Social and Emotional Growth: Promoting a sense of belonging and responsibility through group advisory activities, providing experiences in such areas as social skills, values clarification, reasoning, and cooperative behavior;
- o School Advocate and Guide: Building a caring relationship, acting as a buffer for the student, working on the student's positive self image, monitoring attendance, being the school contact person for the student's parents.¹²

Such a program puts at least one faculty member in continual close contact with each student. Thus, the school is sure of having at least one "expert" on every one of its students--one professional who understands that student well and who can mobilize school resources to meet his or her needs.¹³

Another report suggests the following as the Teacher Advisor's areas of responsibility with student advisees: 1) goal setting and evaluation, 2) study habits, 3) parent relations, 4) career exploration, 5) personal development, 6) decision making skills, 7) educational planning, and 8) school and community issues (e.g., student rights and responsibilities).¹⁴

The Counselor's Role in a Teacher Advisor Program

Asking each teacher to develop lessons or activities on the eight topics just listed would be burdensome. To ease the load on teachers, the professional counseling staff develops the guidance curriculum and can prepare "recipe" lessons that require little or no teacher planning.

The counselor trains the Teacher Advisors in communication and human relations skills and provides them with resource support, while serving the more general function of leading, managing, and coordinating the Teacher Advisor program. These responsibilities come in addition to his or her regular duties of counseling students and consulting on counseling issues.

The Selection of Teacher Advisors

If we follow the advice of several authors on the subject, the title "Teacher Advisor" may be a misnomer: they suggest that the principal, librarians, special education teachers--in fact every credentialed professional in the school--be an advisor. There are two reasons for this. First, using the full staff allows for the lowest possible advisor-advisee ratio. Second, having all professionals involved highlights the importance of the advisory program, promotes a feeling of shared effort, and brings the adjunct staff closer to the classroom faculty.¹⁵ Of course, it may not be feasible to have full staff participation immediately. Some schools may choose to begin with a few volunteer teachers.

Two options for matching advisors to advisees are random assignment or student choice. It is commonly recommended that advisor and advisee stay together through all three middle grade years. This implies advisory groups made up of students from all three grades, which has the advantage of providing a more diverse group.¹⁶ However--except in the unlikely case of

every teacher teaching all three grades--this system clashes with a recommendation from other authors: that the student have at least one academic class with his or her advisor.¹⁷ This second plan allows the advisor to see the advisee "in action" and provides the student with longer daily contact with his or her advisor.

Activities for a Teacher Advisor Program

A range of activities can--and should--occur within the advisory period, in order to provide variety and to address the different academic and personal development goals of the guidance curriculum. It is recommended that activities be organized into a regular weekly schedule, for this provides students with a sense of stability and security. It also helps the advisor: having some days of "regular" or "recipe" activities eases the planning burden, giving teachers time to exercise creativity on a few special activities they may wish to develop.¹⁸

Some activities commonly used during advisory periods are: school orientation (e.g., reviewing the student handbook and school rules), uninterrupted sustained silent reading, study skills instruction, indoor or outdoor games, career speakers from the community, story reading, values clarification exercises, school or community service projects, holiday celebrations, and days focusing on individual students (e.g., a "This is Your Life" activity).¹⁹

The balance between types of activities is likely to change over time. At the beginning of a Teacher Advisor program, both teachers and students may be apprehensive about engaging in self-disclosure and values clarification activities. Beginning an advisory program with simpler, non-disclosing activities, such as orientation, study skills instruction, or sustained silent reading, may allow group trust to build. More "personal" activities can then

be introduced gradually.²⁰

Scheduling Advisory Periods

Devoting a regular time period to student advisement gives the program recognition as an important and stable part of the school program. There are many options: homeroom may be extended 20 to 30 minutes every day after announcements; a weekly time block may be set aside (either a set period or in rotation, to avoid impinging on the same class period); an "advisory period" may occur 2 or 3 times a week alternating with the student's music or art class; or a teacher's advisory period may be scheduled against advisees' study hall, so that the teacher may pull out individuals or groups for advisory activities. Schools offering an extended-period interdisciplinary core course might include the advisory component within that time block, leaving the length of time spent on advisory issues to the discretion of the core teacher or teaching team.²¹

The idea of scheduling the advisory session first thing in the morning seems very popular. Twenty to thirty minutes is a commonly-suggested time span for advisory activities.

Most authors recommend scheduling time with individual advisees, within or apart from the group advisory period. Group activities foster social skill development and allow common needs (e.g., study skills instruction) to be addressed. Individual time permits each advisee to develop a personal relationship with the advisor. Individual time might be scheduled before or after school, during lunch, on a less frequent or an "as needed" basis.

Program Design and Implementation

As with any new program, developing a solid Teacher Advisor program

depends on careful needs assessment, "buy in" by all those involved, strong administrative support, and ongoing staff development. Shockley, Schumacher, and Smith feel that staff development is particularly important in this case, because teachers are being asked to take on what--for some--may be new roles and to practice new communication skills and classroom strategies.²²

One method for ongoing teacher assistance is the creation of "advisor teams": six to twelve Teacher Advisors who meet on a regular basis to share ideas, support each other, learn new skills, and plan new projects.²³

Bergmann and Baxter highlight nine actions as essential to the success of a Teacher Advisor program:

- o Train each teacher and the principal in basic counseling skills.
- o Ensure that every student is scheduled into the program for at least the minimum amount of time.
- o Provide informal guidance as well, since a student's problem can't always wait for the next advisory period.
- o Ensure that teachers are trained in basic human relations skills before they embark on the program.
- o Support teachers (for example, through inservice courses or retreats).
- o Make sure that guidance principles permeate the whole curriculum; for example, plan subject area work that reinforces students' learning of decision making skills.
- o Make health information available to every student--health and growth are major concerns to students at this age.
- o Inform parents about the program.
- o Write it up as a formal curriculum with goals, a scope and sequence, activities, and evaluation procedures.²⁴

Two already-mentioned factors bear repeating, since almost every author

on the subject considers them indispensable to program success: 1) ongoing administrative support and 2) recognition of the school counselor as the program's leader and resource person.²⁵

Potential Problems

As was previously noted, the greatest potential for trouble is likely to lie in role confusion between the counseling and teaching staffs--in the mistaken perception that Teacher Advisors are intended to act as, or to replace, professional counselors. It is essential, during the program design phase, to carefully define tasks and to clarify all roles.

A problem that may come later in program development is that of maintaining staff enthusiasm and cooperation. According to Bergmann and Baxter, by the end of the first year some teachers will be committed and innovative, but others will be only lukewarm--doing no more than going through the motions--and an unfortunate few may have fallen flat in this new role. The authors suggest that the program leader keep pushing and praising; resurvey staff needs, so that all three types of teachers get the support they need; and try to engage the "lukewarm" group, perhaps by asking some of them to serve on the program's steering committee.²⁶

Garawski reports that some teachers become worried if their groups do not become cohesive. Counselors can reassure them that tensions occur naturally in the life cycle of any group. If the tension is being caused by a particular disruptive student, that student might be moved into the advisory group run directly by the counselor.²⁷

Benefits of a Teacher Advisor Program

Teacher Advisor programs have, in specific schools, dramatically reduced

discipline problems; given students a feeling of belonging, of personal recognition, of being cared for; and aided students in understanding themselves and others. Other cited benefits are:

An Advisement program will aid in providing a more positive climate for the whole school. Communication will improve among counselors, administrators, and teachers. Each staff member will recognize the interdependence of their different roles and will gain a new respect for each person's contribution to the process of helping students.²⁸

By taking a role in the guidance curriculum and advisement, teachers are likely to find that they are enhancing themselves as teachers. Gaining more personal knowledge of students aids in diagnosis and effective teaching. In addition, this more personal relationship with students may provide the very thing most people are seeking when they enter the teaching profession: the chance to make a visible, positive difference in young people's lives.²⁹

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